

# Guidelines for Having Anti-Bias Conversations



## 1 Engage in Dialogue, Not Debate

Debate	Dialogue
trying to prove rightness	trying to understand different points of view
listening for flaws in arguments	listening to understand an opposing view
one right answer	more than one right answer
winning vs. losing	introspecting about personal positions
asking questions with leading purposes	asking questions out of curiosity

## 2 Norms, Group Agreements, Ground Rules

Group norms can keep a discussion on track if they are established up front and the group has buy-in. Once created, they can be continually referenced. “Assume best intentions,” “agree and disagree politely,” “dialogue, not debate” and “be accountable” are examples of common norms for sensitive conversations.

## 3 Meet People Where They Are

People come to the table with their own perspectives. Suspend judgement when having difficult conversations. Meet students where they are, but don’t leave them there. Challenge stereotypes and biases in ways that *draw them in* rather than *call them out*.

## 4 Use a Developmental Approach

Start with lighter topics and move to heavier ones once trust has been built. Begin with definitions or a question like, “What’s something that makes you feel proud about your identity?” From there, move into assumptions people make about each other or ask a question like “Which groups in this school struggle?” Talk about implicit bias and how it manifests at school. Then the group can move into more difficult topics.

## 5 Stay Neutral

When students make statements that are inaccurate or bigoted, it’s important to say they are unacceptable and to reinforce school values. However, if students raise other controversial viewpoints, it is useful to remain neutral and invite multiple opinions into the mix. Allow students to discuss and draw their own conclusions without interjecting your own point of view.

## 6 Question Correctly

Avoid low-level questioning that simply recalls facts or requires only a “yes” or “no.” Initiate critical thinking by:

- Using questions that ask how or why something happened
- Requiring application of a concept to a larger concept
- Drawing out opposing views, such as “What do others think?” or “Who disagrees?”
- Allowing “uncomfortable silence” to provide time to think and formulate responses
- Playing devil’s advocate by saying, “How would you feel if...?” or “Who might be disadvantaged by that?”

## 7 Conflict Will Arise

People will inevitably disagree and conflict can arise when values differ. Conflict is not always bad – it can make conversations more real and meaningful.

- Refer to ground rules when conflict arises. If they are followed, the conflict shouldn’t escalate.
- Remind participants about having a dialogue.
- Use “I” statements.
- If a conflict escalates, the conversation may need to stop. Conflict can be mediated privately if it is taking over the discussion. A pause will allow people time to calm down and collect their thoughts.